



TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS FOR LINKS – SOME ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These guidelines were based on research and consultation with Health Links partners and staff at THET and written by a volunteer, Harriet Jones, to whom THET is most grateful.

Photographs are an excellent way of illustrating the work of Health Links programmes. They are powerful tools that are capable of sending both the right and wrong message so planning and thinking about what you are going to photograph is important. This is especially true in health care settings where you must consider that people are often unwell and at their most vulnerable. When publishing photographs it is important that they are captioned correctly and that the document is laid out so titles are not misleading. Seeking informed consent, respect of patient confidentiality, cultural and other considerations need to be taken into account to ensure that the dignity of the people photographed is to be respected.

INTRODUCTION

Photographs are an excellent way of illustrating the work of Health Links programmes. Visual images provide extra depth to written material and are an effective way of making an impact on the audience. Photographs are used for presentations to donors, to report back to other members of the Health Link or in THET publications. It is important that the process of taking and publishing photographs is done in an ethical manner. The following guidelines aim to provide the reader with some ethical considerations for taking and publishing photographs of Health Links programmes.

PURPOSE OF TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPH

Photography is an important tool that can be used to illustrate the work of Health Links. It is an opportunity for further partnership within the Health Link and not a one-sided reflection of the greater wealth and technology of the UK partner. The purpose and priorities of photography should be discussed between both partners in the Health Link so it becomes an aspect of the shared Link work.

Before taking a photograph it is important to consider what you want to illustrate and what the photos will be used for. Make sure that the subject matter is relevant and the photograph isn't simply being taken for the sake of it. Photographs are powerful tools which have the potential to send the wrong message, as well as being able to illustrate situations accurately.

Photographs taken for one purpose or audience may not be suitable for another. For example, if you are taking photographs for health care professionals it may be appropriate to take detailed photos of specific medical conditions. This may not be as appropriate when taking photographs to illustrate a Health Links project to a local community group.

Examples of the uses of photographs:

- Educational purposes
- Donor reporting
- Fundraising
- To illustrate the need for intervention

TAKING and PUBLISHING PHOTOGRAPHS

It is particularly important when taking photographs in health care settings to consider who and what you are taking photographs of and how you will represent different situations. In health care settings people are likely to be unwell and at their most vulnerable.

True representation

It is essential to produce a true representation of the situation you are documenting. It is important to make sure that the photos you take are natural and not overly posed in order to illustrate the situation accurately. Photos can be arranged, but ensure that the situation you are trying to illustrate is not distorted and that you are not misleading the viewer in any way.

Think about what the photograph is showing:

- Does it show a true partnership between the Links' partners?
- Does it show one partner as dominant and one as dependent on the other?

Captions

Always make sure you caption a picture correctly. In order to do this you will need to know who or what you are taking a photograph of. Note down who is in the photograph and then what they are wearing or another distinguishing feature, at the time you take the picture. This will enable you to give an accurate description of who is in the photograph when you come to publish it.

Document layout

Once you have your photographs, consider where to place them in your document or publication. Do not place a photograph next to a section of writing or a heading that has no relevance to the photo, or where there could be a misinterpretation of the photo's subject. Be particularly careful that you use photos of the Health Link that you are talking about – do not use photos from similar Health Links programmes, other health care settings or photographs taken in another country.

To ensure that there are no misunderstandings it is possible to include a disclosure in the publication (see example below from Photoshare - Development photography ethics - <http://www.photoshare.org/phototips/developethics.php>)

"The photographs in this material are used for illustrative purposes only; they do not imply any particular health status, attitudes, behaviours or actions on the part of any person who appears in the photographs."

Quality

Make sure the photos that you take are of a reasonable quality. Often photos will be increased in size for publication and the quality may be lost when they are enlarged. For example, camera-phones do not always produce good quality photographs.

Things to think about when taking photographs:

- Make sure there is adequate light
- Do not point the camera towards the sun
- Make sure the background is simple and uncluttered
- Hold the camera steady and make sure the picture is sharp

Copies

It is a good idea to get copies of any photographs that are taken and give them to the people you photographed. If the photographs are published make sure that copies of the publication are also sent to the individuals in the photographs.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of ethical issues that need to be considered when taking photographs, particularly in health care settings. These are concerned with getting informed consent and accurately representing and captioning your photographs.

Informed consent

You must always get informed consent when taking photographs. Make sure that the individuals concerned have given permission for you to take the photograph and know what the photographs will be used for and where they may be published. This consent may be verbal or written (although written is preferable). Individuals being photographed should be made to feel comfortable. Make it clear that an individual can withdraw their consent at any time. If a child is involved parental consent must be granted first. Remember that the age at which you are no longer a child will vary between cultures and societies.

See: Cairns Convention - <http://www.uq.edu.au/coh/index.html?page=43575&pid=43570>

Patient confidentiality

The names of individuals in photographs should only be used if you are given explicit consent to do so. This particularly applies in health care settings, as you may be referring to someone's health status. Many health conditions are greatly stigmatised e.g. HIV, TB, leprosy and mental illness: this must be considered at all times. One way to protect the identity of a patient is by pixilation of the photograph or blocking out their eyes. This, however, is not always effective at protecting a person's identity and should not take the place of informed consent. Informed consent must always be granted regardless of what you do to the photo in terms of anonymity.

See: ICMJE Patient Confidentiality - <http://www.icmje.org/#privacy>

Cultural considerations

It is important to approach people in a culturally sensitive manner. It must be remembered that what is considered appropriate varies greatly between cultures and societies and that people in different cultures will have varying views towards photography, and the subjects you intend to document. It must also be remembered that in many countries people may not be aware of rights such as doctor/patient confidentiality. However, these rights still apply regardless of whether the individual is aware of this or not. Human rights and ethical data collection must be considered at all times.

Always consider what you are photographing – in some countries it may not be considered appropriate to take photos of government or military buildings, or personnel. The extent of these restrictions will vary from country to country.

See: Photoshare - Development photo ethics - <http://www.photoshare.org/phototips/developethics.php>

Gender relationships vary between cultures. These must also be respected when taking photographs or approaching an individual for consent. **Power relationships** should also be considered as again these vary between cultures. This consideration should also apply to the partners in the Health Link and if your picture reflects the shared values of the Link.

Respect and dignity

Photographs should not harm those who appear in them. Photographs should only be taken in good faith and should always show people with dignity and not as victims (HelpAge International).

THET would welcome comments from Links on these guidelines in the light of your own experiences of taking photographs of your programmes.